

## Article

# The Role of Actors in Social Innovation in Rural Areas

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**Abstract:** Social innovation is gaining momentum in academia, policy and practice, as a process by which local communities generate new social relations and become more capable of addressing social needs and opportunities. However, there is significant ambiguity about the role of the different types of actors involved in social innovation, particularly in rural areas. This article aims to examine which actors make social innovation in rural areas possible, and the roles they play in these processes. Drawing on 33 interviews carried out with key informants of three socially innovative initiatives developed in rural areas of Spain and Scotland, this paper illustrates the scale, role and logic of the actors involved. The findings of the study clarify the central role of local processes and local actors, the impact of facilitators and perceived neutrality. They also show the contribution of social economy organizations as an arena for coordinating plural networks and civil society initiatives. The way the public sector and LEADER participate in social innovation processes in rural areas are also reflected in the results.

**Keywords:** rural development; territorial development; facilitators; social economy; LEADER; social relations; governance; networks; attitude; innovation policy



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## 1. Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is becoming increasingly important for tackling today's societal challenges, as a growing number of research studies have shown. Several authors consider it to be the new paradigm of innovation in the 21st century [1]. Public institutions have also embraced and value the benefits of SI to solve social problems as a complementary mechanism to the market and the state [2]. Nevertheless, the field is still not consolidated, and further research is needed to provide empirical evidence and contribute to the conceptualization of the phenomenon [3,4].

Despite the rapid growth of interest in SI, it remains an incipient research topic in the rural literature [5], whose use in rural development policies is ambiguous [6]. Among the issues concerning rural studies, there is considerable uncertainty about the role of the different types of actors involved in SI processes [7,8]. This is especially important in SI, where the subject of innovation resides precisely in the actors and their patterns of interaction [9].

A territorial approach is particularly necessary to address the role of actors in SI. The research conclusions on this issue obtained in urban environments cannot always be extrapolated to rural contexts. At the same time, rural territories are heterogeneous and undergo different territorial dynamics depending on their location, institutional environment, and participation in global socioeconomic processes [10]. This implies that the networks and roles of the actors involved in SI may vary according to the rural and regional context in question.

In order to address the aforementioned gap, this paper poses the following research question: *Which actors are involved in SI initiatives in rural territories and what role do they play in these processes?* The main theoretical contribution of this article is a better understanding of the actors involved in SI processes in rural areas, a topic that requires further attention in SI literature. To this aim, we propose an original analytical framework comprising three elements (scale, role and logic) based on primary data collected from rural initiatives

developed in Spain and Scotland. By doing so, we introduce a comparative analysis of northern and southern European contexts, a rare perspective in SI studies in rural areas [4,11–13]. All this will support the definition of public policies that are better suited, not only to the particular nature of rural territories, but also to the characteristics of each SI initiative.

To provide an answer to this, Section 2 explains the role of SI in rural development and contextualizes it in relation to studies on leadership, governance, and the role of actors in SI. This is followed by Section 3, which presents the analytical framework, method and data used for the empirical phase of the research. Section 4 presents the study areas and SI case studies. Sections 5 and 6 present and discuss the results obtained in three case studies, respectively. Finally, Section 7 outlines the main contribution of this research in addition to the next steps that could be taken to deepen and broaden our knowledge of SI in rural areas.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Social Innovation and Rural Development

The notion of SI is not new. Schumpeter [14], Ogburn [15] or Polanyi [16], among others, have already referred to this concept more or less explicitly during the 20th century. However, the meaning of the notion has changed throughout history, according to the institutional context of each era and place [17]. In the 21st century, SI has been used interchangeably to refer, for instance, to new entrepreneurial solutions (models, processes, products, etc.) to social challenges and needs [18]; to new practices that affect social structures and the general well-being of the population [1]; or to the satisfaction of human needs through new social relations and empowerment processes [19].

Although it is accepted that SI is a phenomenon dependent on the territorial context [20], much of the literature neglects the particularities of rural areas. This gap has started to be bridged in recent years through the work of authors of rural tradition [5,9,21], where the understanding of the SI phenomenon finds several points of convergence. In general, it is conceived as a process (i) based on collective actions and transformations within social relations [9,22], (ii) where the main changes and outcomes occur on intangible elements [5,9,23], (iii) whose originality or novelty is relative to the context in which it is developed [23], and (iv) in which civil society is involved to different degrees [24,25]. In the present research, we gather these common points, and define SI as a process of reconfiguration of social relations between actors that leads to new forms of action in pursuit of collective goals, whose main result is the creation of social value [26].

We understand SI processes as those reconfigurations in social relations that occur in three dimensions: actor networks, attitudes, and governance arrangements [22]. SI initiatives can include new actors, new roles within existing networks, new values and motivations, and new coordination structures and mechanisms. SI transforms the way local actors interact in addition to how local communities connect and coordinate with external actors [27]. SI initiatives are identified as original and more efficient ways of social organization to achieve collective goals. They are processes recognized as innovative in their context and do not need to be replicable or scalable.

Some authors argue that rural societies are an appropriate context for SI, insofar as they represent small communities where more sociable and cohesive forms of life persist [23,28]. Simultaneously, there is some debate as to whether this is a process driven primarily by demands from the population to satisfy unmet social needs (demand-led), or by opportunities to generate new activities and improve the governance of rural territories (opportunity-driven) [28,29]. The different impulses and the actors' perception of the community's needs and opportunities determine, to a large extent, the intensity of SI and its transformative capacity [27].

Therefore, SI's contribution to rural development has multiple dimensions. On one hand, it is a means to find new and more effective solutions to traditional rural challenges, such as the lack of facilities and services [22,24,30]. On the other hand, SI is an end in itself

that allows the reconnection of rural societies internally and externally. The first process refers to the incorporation of new groups of actors, mainly social and/or economic, in local development dynamics and the generation of social assets that improve the future performance of communities. Examples include greater social cohesion, sense of place or capacity-building [24,31].

Regarding the second process, rural territories benefit from the interactive nature of SI, associated with new social interactions that are not limited to the geographic area of the local community. During SI processes, actors from other territories are involved and different forms of coordination with organizations at different territorial scales are established [7,32]. This contributes to the articulation of rural communities with their socio-institutional environment (regional governments, firms, or third sector networks, etc.) and impacts their ability to access resources and their participation in decision-making processes [24]. Therefore, improved governance mechanisms adapted to the reality of these areas can be generated. The internal and external reconnection of rural actors are not only compatible, but complementary and necessary phenomena for the socioeconomic development of rural communities [33].

## 2.2. Key Actors in Social Innovation

In essence, SI is a process of innovation in social relations. It contributes to rural development by configuring new patterns of interaction between actors, whether these be individuals or organizations. Actors are the protagonists of reflexivity processes, through which they monitor the territorial context and deliberate about the activities and events that occur within it, with the aim of developing, implementing, and modifying ideas [34]. Actors also undertake preparatory actions, such as the construction and dissemination of narratives [35], in order to encourage a critical mass of individuals to participate and make the idea of innovation a reality [22]. Two aspects are relevant regarding the effective action of actors. Firstly, it depends on the agency or personal capacity to take action and transform the existing institutions and social system [36]. Secondly, agency is embedded in social structures and power relations that limit or encourage, to a greater or lesser extent, the possibilities to act and the scope of actions [34].

The role of actors is inherently linked to leadership. The leadership approach is interesting to address the missing link between the agential dimension of SI and how agents of change confront structural-contextual forces. Leadership is increasingly recognized in SI literature as a quality of groups, a view that challenges the conventional concept of leadership as individual leaders influencing followers [37–39]. Instead, leadership is a relational process in which actors are socially embedded [37]. While certain key individuals are often important, it is the production of collective capacities that contributes to democratizing SI initiatives and multiplying their effects [38]. Relational leadership in SI should be seen as a distributed practice of actors across sectors and scales that transform individual efforts into collective achievements [37,38]. However, there is not a set of practices or premises for effective leadership in SI. The specific conditions affecting a community or region determine the capacity for leadership to emerge and develop [40]. Leadership is composed of elements of physical, relational and emotional proximity, which provide shared vision and social legitimation in SI initiatives [41,42].

In rural areas, community leadership tends to be understood as inclusive, goal-driven and undertaken by a group of people that are willing to share power with others [43]. These groups of people can be configured by hybrid combinations of public and private actors. However, civil society usually plays a leading role in rural SI. In rural territories, this fact is of particular interest, to the extent that they are recognized as places where the presence of conventional innovation actors (universities, technological institutes, and companies) is lower, and where the agglomeration factor (a determining factor for creative processes and spill-overs) is replaced by low population densities [44]. Thus, civil society self-organization and networks with actors outside the territory are recognized as defining elements of SI

in rural areas [24,25,32,45]. These features can be clearly linked to the quadruple helix model [46].

Almost by definition, the leading role of civil society is also attributed to the leadership of social economy (SE) entities. Anglo-Saxon studies describe social enterprises as promoters of SI initiatives, mainly because they are enterprises whose social and collective objectives are more important than economic ones and, therefore, they continuously pursue new solutions to meet social needs [28,47]. From the European SE tradition, these entities are also significant for SI because they incorporate participatory and inclusive processes in their performance and can, therefore, promote new social relations and the empowerment of new social groups linked to their activities [48,49]. For example, the SI-DRIVE project shows that NGOs or non-profit organizations are the leading actor in almost 50% of the over 1000 SI initiatives examined [50].

In the rural literature, the connection between SE and SI is still underexplored. In the Anglo-Saxon context, recent studies highlight that the importance of social enterprises in SI processes is due to their capacity to integrate material and immaterial aspects of their rural environment, to combine economic and social relations, and to act as intermediaries between the rural community and key actors outside the territory [51,52]. In Spain, these relationships have been especially explored in southern regions, where the role of agricultural cooperatives in activating SI processes and combating depopulation has been demonstrated [53,54].

SI goes beyond the leadership of civil society. The nature of this phenomenon requires cross-sectoral interactions at different scales [9,50]. The public sector is one of the actors that explain this hybrid character of SI. Its role is usually described as complementary to that of civil society, providing funding, networking support or legal frameworks for the emergence and development of innovations [50,55]. This very function of the public sector is usually emphasized in local development studies [56,57].

Many SI initiatives establish multi-level governance mechanisms with public organizations that enable them to be effective and scalable. This reflects the interactive dynamic necessary for neo-endogenous rural development, combining bottom-up/top-down and endogenous/exogenous processes [23]. The interactive nature of SI led some authors to conceptualize *bottom-linked governance* or *bottom-linked SI* as novel forms of cooperative and democratic governance between civil society and public sector across different scales [58]. The concept is important to link SI initiatives with broader socio-political changes and to stress those processes enhanced by the public sector [59]. Bottom-linked governance can be an outcome of SI processes when social reconfigurations generate new combinations of actors, resources, functions and coordination instruments. Additionally, bottom-linked governance is key for SI durability because it facilitates flexible and inclusive spaces for new collective actions [59,60].

Nonetheless, the involvement of the public sector in SI and bottom-linked governance mechanisms is complex. Copus et al. [30] explain that this depends on the role that governments have historically played in each community, the prevailing welfare regime in the region or country, and the greater or lesser degree of decentralization existing in the prevailing forms of territorial governance. For example, recent research in Nordic rural areas identifies that the civil society–public sector pairing is the most relevant combination of actors in the early stages of SI and that the public sector is especially involved in SI initiatives related to the provision of social services [7]. Other authors note that the public sector should play a strategic role in revitalizing latent rural communities, as a source of inspiration and networking [46], in addition to contributing to improving territorial conditions for SI in those rural areas most weakened by their remote conditions and/or the impact of austerity policies [24,61]. However, there is also evidence—albeit limited—that the public sector can lead SI processes in rural territories, such as described by Franklin et al. [62] in the field of community food growing initiatives in Hungary.

While examining the role of the public sector in rural SI, allusions to the role of LEADER and Local Action Groups (LAGs) are also frequent. SI is one of the defining

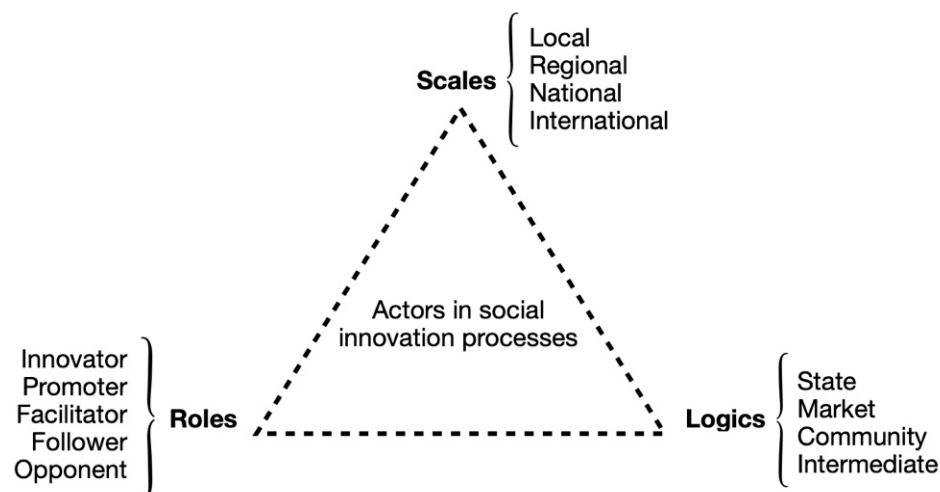
characteristics of the LEADER<sup>1</sup> method since its implementation in the late 1990s [63–65], although it is not explicitly referred to until much later [66]. The capacity of the LEADER method to promote SI lies in the fact that its design pursues the formation of new cross-sectoral networks, bottom-up processes, public–private partnerships, and cooperation dynamics, which is directly linked to the emergence of new ideas and new social relations [67–70]. For instance, Dargan and Shucksmith [71], based on an extensive analysis of LEADER projects in different European rural contexts, concluded that the practical experience of rural development policies is mainly associated with the generation of local connections, collective learning processes and the improvement of the rural milieu [71]. Yet, other studies show that the practical implementation of LEADER does not always allow the full socially innovative potential of the method to be realized due the excessive bureaucratization, the tendency to prioritize low-risk projects and the existence of clientelist networks [72,73].

Thus, there are still many gaps in the literature about the role of the different actors in SI processes in rural areas. The theoretical role of civil society tends to be over-represented, while that of the public sector is controversial. Furthermore, the role of LEADER and the social economy in SI in rural contexts remains little explored.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Analytical Framework for Social Innovation Actors

The study of SI in rural areas faces the challenge of a diversity of dimensions and actors involved in this type of initiative. It is necessary to design an analytical framework that allows for an operational categorization of the complexity associated with SI. Based on the literature reviewed in the previous section, we present the following three analytical dimensions that guide our empirical research on the role of actors in SI processes: logics, roles, and scales (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Analytical framework for social innovation actors. Own elaboration.

Avelino and Wittmayer [74] suggest a model based on the multi-actor perspective, where the interests that define the performance of actors in SI are grouped under four logics: (i) state logic, rooted in non-profit, formal relationships that pursue the general interest (e.g., administrations and public bodies); (ii) market logic, structured in profit-making, formal relationships motivated by private and particular interests (e.g., capitalist and commercial companies); (iii) community logic, defined by non-profit, informal relationships that meet a combination of individual and group interests (e.g., households and families); (iv) intermediate logic, represented by actors that by nature interact between the three previous logics, depending on each particular process (e.g., social economy and third sector entities).



In addition to the logics or interests that drive the actors' actions, they can also adopt specific roles according to their participation in different phases or activities of SI. Drawing on innovation and territorial development literature [21,46,60,61], we have elaborated on the original terminology for the role of actors in SI. *Innovators* are those actors who formulate a novel idea or import it from outside, even if it is not necessarily feasible at the time it is proposed [22]. Among the qualities of innovators is their ability to take risks and embark on unusual actions in their territorial environment [75]. *Promoters* may play a leading role in the dissemination of the idea, but they are especially responsible for its implementation. *Facilitating* actors assume the role of generating the conditions for actors to reflect, decide, interact, and take action [76]. This figure is similar to the one described by Rogers [75] regarding the *change agent*, whose role is to persuade and guarantee the adoption of the innovation. Moreover, this role is often associated with public actors [55]. *Followers* embrace the idea and join the initiative, for example, as users of an activity, beneficiaries, or simple collaborators [22,75]. Finally, *opponents* resist the idea of innovation somewhat explicitly, or try to block or redirect it during its development. This can occur when some actors may be affected as the innovation gives an impetus to other members of the system to adopt it, widening a socio-economic gap over the opponents [75]. The presence of opponents is especially likely in radical SI processes [27].

A third dimension in which SI actors operate is the territorial scale. SIs can combine actors at local (infra-municipal, municipal, or county), regional, national and international scales.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Qualitative Analysis

The previous analytical framework allows us to address the empirical dimension of the research through a mapping of SI actors in rural areas and the identification of their logics, roles, and territorial scales. This approach is applied to three case studies from Spain and Scotland. The case study method enables the examination of each innovation process in its particular context [77] and, at the same time, the cross-case approach helps to build more generalizable insights [78]. The latter is important since it also contributes to a better understanding of the influence of different institutional settings on actors' involvement in SI and to a comparative analysis between rural areas in Northern and Southern Europe.

The fieldwork was undertaken in two rural areas located in remote and intermediate regions, with a well-defined geographical scope: the parish of Birse (northeast Scotland, UK) and Ibiza–Formentera (Balearic Islands, eastern Spain). This choice was justified by the importance of collecting different socioeconomic and institutional conditions. In each area, the selected case studies met four basic criteria: (i) initiatives perceived by local actors as novel and innovative in their local context, (ii) with the potential to improve the well-being and sustainable development of rural communities; (iii) develop in different fields of rural development (diversity of initiatives); and (iv) some value/richness in the available information was detected in advance [79]. The case studies are related to new forms of land ownership and forestry (Birse Community Trust, BCT), new forms of natural resource management in the face of socio-environmental conflicts (Alianza Mar Blava, AMB), and processes of agricultural revitalization and preservation of the rural landscape (Cooperativa del Camp, CC).

The primary data were collected through fieldwork between 2017 and 2018. The main qualitative technique used in data collection was semi-structured interviews with key informants, previously detected and purposely selected [80]. This technique was supplemented by participant observation and documentary analysis of the three initiatives. A total of 33 interviews were conducted (15 in AMB, 13 in CC and 5 in BCT). The variation in the number of interviews reflects the different volume of actors involved in each initiative. In the BCT case, the information available through secondary sources was very rich, which made it possible to reduce the number of interviews and focus their content on very specific aspects related to the perceptions of key actors, in addition to latent tensions within the community.

The interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 min, aimed to identify the network of actors involved in the initiative, their main characteristics, and their role throughout the process. These questions were followed by other queries to contextualize the SI initiative, e.g., what factors promoted the emergence of the innovation, the main changes perceived in the networks, the attitudes and forms of coordination, and the main practices developed. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed using F5 v.7.0.1 (2018) software, F5, Inc. (Seattle, WA, USA).

Participant observation was developed through the researchers' presence at board meetings (in all case studies) and participation in socio-cultural events (BCT). This method allowed for a better understanding of the social settings in which SI initiatives take place [81], faithfully capturing the reality of the interactions between actors and then contrasting it with the discourses collected in the interviews. A field diary was used to collect the researchers' own perceptions of the activities in which they were present, in addition to photographic material.

The secondary information gathered allowed us to identify actors involved in SI processes prior to the interviews and, in some cases, to complement the information from the ex-post interviews. This information also enabled us to improve our understanding of the study area, in addition to the historical perspective in which each case study was embedded. For all cases, information from social media and local press was used. In the particular case of AMB, we also relied on several reports available on the association's website<sup>2</sup>. Through the BCT<sup>3</sup> website we also had access to meetings' minutes and newsletters from the beginning of the innovation process, in addition to multiple annual strategies, territorial data and reports illustrating the role of various actors over time.

The analytical process of the research was based on the triangulation of information generated from documentary analysis in combination with the analysis of semi-structured interviews and participant observation data [82]. All data were examined using the technique of qualitative content analysis. Through this process, firstly, a deductive thematic organization of the data was derived in accordance with our analytical framework. Secondly, an inductive process was followed with new sub-categories closer to each case study, which are reflected in the results and discussion section. The qualitative analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2018 software [83].

#### 4. Description of Study Areas and Social Innovation Initiatives

The SI initiatives selected for this study are innovative in their context. They illustrate processes in which new social relations are created and sustainable development is promoted. Despite the fact that some of the examples are difficult to replicate, they help us to understand the social and intangible dimensions of contemporary rural development processes in Europe. In this section, we present the case studies and study areas of the research, and underline the SI component of each example.

##### 4.1. Birse Community Trust and the Parish of Birse

The parish of Birse is located in Aberdeenshire (Scotland, UK), a forest area with fewer than 800 inhabitants and 6 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. While this territory has poor accessibility and weak access to services, it is relatively strong in terms of employment and household income thanks to its proximity to Aberdeen (44 km) and the impact of the oil and gas industry. The case study we examined (BCT) emerged as a response to the different needs faced by this area, such as the weakness of local governance systems in Scotland, the high concentration of land ownership in a few families, and the abandonment of local assets linked to the natural heritage of the community. The initiative also capitalized on opportunities, such as the high dynamism of the community, the new funding linked to the development trust model in the United Kingdom, the high ecological and cultural value of the area, or the Scottish policy framework that allows local communities access to land and forest ownership (Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003).

BCT was triggered by the rediscovery of ancient community rights on the use of the Forest of Birse. After three years of negotiation with estates, in 1998, the rights were transferred to a community body (BCT) owned by every inhabitant of the parish. Since then, BCT has been managing several forests and assets of local interest. The process has promoted a more equitable distribution and social use of the land, a reconnection with the natural environment, an improved local governance system, a new role of civil society in local decision making, stronger relations with public organizations, and learning in the management of socio-economic projects.

#### 4.2. *Alianza Mar Blava and Ibiza-Formentera*

AMB takes place in Ibiza and Formentera (Balearic Islands, Spain). They represent an integrated area formed by two islands (LEADER area). In total, they have more than 100,000 inhabitants and 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. The islands are defined as rural and intermediate areas under urban pressure, where the economy is based on tourism (40–50% of GDP). The ecological relevance of the environment and landscape is the main tourist attraction. At the same time, the social climate between tourism businessmen and environmental organizations is in conflict, due to their different interests in the territory.

This initiative originated as a response to several oil prospecting projects in the Balearic Sea promoted by international companies and the national government. Despite the complexity, there was an unusual common position among local community actors against the projects. A new association (AMB) was set up, and a new network representative of the local community was constructed. The process involved novel social reconfigurations, such as collaboration between previously confronted actors (business and environmental actors), a new shared vision of the natural environment and of personal and human relations, and a new discourse on sustainability among business actors. Through administrative actions, pressure and social protest it was possible to stop a large part of the hydrocarbon projects. The social learning processes identified include new mechanisms of marine governance and replication at the local level.

#### 4.3. *Cooperativa del Camp and Formentera*

Formentera is the smaller island of the Ibiza–Formentera area, with fewer than 12,000 inhabitants and 100 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. It is defined as a remote area, where more than half of the population lives in scattered settlements. The progressive abandonment of agriculture since the growth of tourism during the 1960s is one of the main challenges faced by this territory. CC was triggered by two processes: (i) the risk of loss of assets of the former cooperative due to inactivity, and (ii) a political interest in reactivating local agriculture and recovering rural landscape. The SI elements in this process included the creation of a new agricultural cooperative (CC) as an agent for the development and coordination of the agricultural sector. A strong public–cooperative coordination was developed and the rural values of the population reinforced. Likewise, civil society was engaged through the *Cens de Terres*, a mechanism for transferring land from local landowners to the cooperative in order to be cultivated and prevent land abandonment.

### 5. Results

In this section we outline the role of the main actors involved in each of the three case studies. Figures A1–A3 detail the actors and summarize their main functions according to the three dimensions of our analytical framework (roles, logics, and scales). Roles are represented by symbols, the four logics are illustrated by four axes, and the different territorial scales are drawn by using circles and different color ranges. When actors hold more than one role, different symbols are included. The figures allow us to quickly visualize the number and diversity of key actors involved in each initiative, the scale at which they operate, the role/s they play, and the logic they adhere to. Additionally, the figures show the links and functions between actors. Weak links or relationships (dotted line)



are depicted as those described in the interviews which could not be fully corroborated through the research.

### 5.1. *Birse Community Trust (Aberdeenshire, Scotland)*

#### 5.1.1. Initial Promoters and Key Innovator

The innovation process at Birse Community Trust (BCT) brought together mainly members of the local community, in particular the innovator, the new BCT management team and, more broadly, the rest of civil society (see Figure A1). The process of negotiating the ancient rights and the formation of BCT was an intense phase in the process of defining and implementing the SI. A total of six people represented the three parties involved during the initial negotiations: two representatives of the two estates (market logic) and four representatives of the local community and civil society (community logic). The latter four actors represented the real promoters of the project in the initial phase. They were mostly people involved in local organizations—community associations—and interested in recovering new uses for the natural environment of Birse. Among them, all the interviewees highlighted one person in particular, BCT\_04, who, in addition to being the promoting force, was considered to be the innovator of the initiative.

BCT\_04 was described in the interviews as a person who is passionate about community issues. After over 25 years of research into the history of the parish, this individual was the one who re-discovered and disseminated the community's ancient rights over the Birse Forest. Professional experience in rural development meant that this person was aware of local needs, of new approaches to development—such as community ownership— and of opportunities for his community—such as those linked to the development trust in the United Kingdom in the 1990s:

“There was a realization in Finzean Community Association that, as a community, if you were not doing things for yourself, nobody else was doing them, and that the community needed a new vehicle to be able to do that. The particular issues at hand were the ancient rights over the Forest of Birse, and the watermills in Finzean [...] Birse Community Trust was set up as a vehicle to save those things [...] I was aware about all these things. I didn't want to do it, but the opportunities were just irresistible [...] When BCT started we decided that it would not raise money locally, because that would take money away from the other community bodies, and it would not use voluntary labor from other organizations but pay local people.” (BCT\_04\_innovator)

BCT\_04 was the main actor in the design of the new community organization, to which ancient rights were to be transferred, and also in the conceptualization of its functioning in the service of local community development. BCT\_04 was the manager of BCT for a short period of time and an advisor to the board of trustees for almost 20 years. In addition to this knowledge of Birse Parish and rural development, this actor had strong personal networks with public institutions and landowning families and drew on them to support the initiative and raise funds.

#### 5.1.2. Between Promoters and Opponents: The Shaping of a New Board and Potential Socio-Political Conflicts

The BCT's management board was the core of the initiative's promoters during its development and consolidation phase. It mainly consisted of a group of trustees, a chair, a patron, and a manager. While BCT is a community enterprise that pursues the common good and its members follow a community logic, the members of the board are also individuals with particular interests and, at times, their own agenda. In May 2018—shortly before the fieldwork of this research—some key positions on the board of trustees, such as the chair and management, were renewed. The community logic underlying their actions is clearly stated in the following quote:

“I think the natural heritage it’s a big one for me. The area would not look the same, or feel the same, without the work that we’ve done. I’m talking about the Forest of Birse, and our commercial forests. I think those are hugely beneficial. Our historic buildings, they would have fallen into the river by now.” (BCT\_03\_BCT trustee)

“I would say I live on two acres of woodland, planted and managed for sustainable reasons and diversity, surrounded by likeminded people [...] I describe it by what’s immediate to me and the people around me participating in BCT.” (BCT\_06\_BCT trustee)

Interviews with several of these new members revealed a critical narrative on the role of the innovator (BCT\_04). The main axes of tension related to a less than inclusive leadership style, differing perceptions of the role of the community, the nature of relations between BCT and large landowners, and the desirable degree of civil society participation in BCT.

The latent conflict between members of the new board team and the innovator was due to ideological and political differences, partly linked to the social structure of the territory. While the innovator was linked to nationalist movements in favor of Scottish independence and was involved in the preparation of the Land Reform Bill, several members of the new team were close to large land-owning families in Birse Parish, in addition to national hunting organizations. These prospects tended to align politically with the center-right Unionist and Conservative Party, which is against Scottish independence.

#### 5.1.3. Followers: The Growing Involvement of Civil Society in the Parish

Despite the existing tensions, the promoters and key innovator of this initiative responded, in essence, to a combination of individual and collective well-being interests (community logic). The remaining members of the civil society of Birse Parish, who were part of the organization only by virtue of the fact that they lived in the area in question, were integrated with the same logic. With the formation of BCT, a coordination structure was established for the first time to enable effective participation of the local population in the decision-making process regarding the management and ownership of various local forests and assets, in addition to proposing new projects that addressed the needs and opportunities of the territory. For example, in the participatory process for the last acquisition of a forest in 2008, more than 600 people voted, 75% of the census. However, direct and regular participation in decision-making was mainly concentrated in the members of the management board. Hence, most other members of the local civil society adopted the role of followers.

#### 5.1.4. Between Supporters and Opponents: BCT’s Controversial Relationship with Estates

Over the last few decades, three estates have accumulated 90% of the land in the parish: Finzean, Birse and Ballogie. These actors were market-driven and had local origins. The relationship between the local community—represented through BCT—and the three estates was controversial and there was no common narrative among interviewees. On the one hand, some members of the new BCT team explained that the landowners felt threatened by the possible interest of BCT, and BCT\_04 particularly, in taking their properties. These were the same individuals who reported tensions with BCT\_04 within the community (see Section 5.1.2).

Nevertheless, another segment of the interviewees maintained a different narrative. The innovator (BCT\_04) argued that BCT, and themselves, managed to reach agreements with the three estates on different occasions, for instance, the transfer of the ancient rights over the Birse Forest and the acquisition of several cultural assets that BCT managed. Other interviewees who were not on the board supported this account, although they also explained that each estate’s relationship with the local community was different. For example, Finzean estate was described as an actor close to civil society and contributing to the improvement of their living conditions—and to the very shaping of BCT—while

Ballogie estate accumulated a greater number of disputes and confrontations with members of the local community.

#### 5.1.5. The Public Sector as Facilitating Actor

The role of the public sector in this initiative focused on being the legal umbrella for the acquisition of forestry assets, in addition to its occasional presence in certain phases and activities. In this sense, the role of the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), the most important public organization that until 2019<sup>4</sup> was in charge of the country's forestry affairs and owned numerous forests, should be highlighted. This entity was important in the acquisition of two forests by the BCT. In addition to financial support, it was also involved in several local governance mechanisms in the forestry field. In financial terms, LEADER<sup>5</sup> was also involved in some specific projects, but with little visible role for the local population and its own group of promoters.

The role of the public sector in this initiative must also be examined from a broader perspective, considering the national government itself and its role in designing an institutional framework that, in part, facilitated the existence of BCT. On one hand, the emergence of BCT was clearly related to the introduction of development trusts in the 1990s, as organizations devoted to promoting initiatives for local development led by civil society. In the context of the United Kingdom, these entities are owned and managed by the local community, they pursue sustainable community development, and are non-profit, independent, and usually seek to generate their own income through the ownership of assets that are invested in local projects [84].

Moreover, the legal instruments opened up by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 [85] are fundamental for the development and consolidation of BCT, in particular for the acquisition of woodlands (Balfour and Slewdrum). This reform was aimed at reducing the constraints that the high concentration of land ownership in Scotland placed on the sustainable development of rural communities. Under the Act, local communities are given the "community right to buy", meaning that they have the opportunity to purchase land in their geographical area, subject to specific organizational and planning requirements. This Act has undergone several amendments that have continued the process of land reform in Scotland. The latest law in this regard is the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 [86], which was recently revised in April 2020. The latter modification, as a new development, allows local communities to exercise an absolute right to buy if they can justify a contribution to sustainable development, that is, they can justify the importance of recovering an asset and force its sale even if the owner does not envisage transferring ownership.

### 5.2. *Alianza Mar Blava (Ibiza-Formentera, Spain)*

Alianza Mar Blava (AMB) was created in May 2013 with the aim of bringing together the societies of Ibiza and Formentera in order to paralyze hydrocarbon projects that threaten the natural environment, one of the most important tourist resources of the territory. The main network of promoters was configured around a working group initially made up of 14 people, a number that varied as the process evolved. This group was made up of representatives of local businesses, environmental and public institutions—market, intermediate and state logic, respectively—and its members were responsible for the daily management of the alliance's activities (see Figure A2).

#### 5.2.1. Ibiza Preservation Fund: Combining the Role of Innovator, Facilitator and Promoter

There was an actor in the environmental sphere that played a strategic role in the emergence of Alianza Mar Blava: the Ibiza Preservation Fund (IPF). This is a philanthropic organization of Anglo-Saxon origin with a presence in Ibiza and Formentera, whose objective is the environmental conservation of the islands and the promotion of sustainable development projects. The person who directs this organization (AMB\_01) performs a prominent role as an innovator, facilitator, and promoter of AMB. All interviewees recognize the central role of this individual in identifying opportunities around the issue of

prospecting and the initial diffusion of the idea of innovation (acting collectively against the external threat). IPF was key in building the initial network of promoters, in funding the first actions and in the development of AMB itself up to the present day.

The participation of AMB\_01 was defined by a series of qualities that enabled us to identify the importance of the actions taken to facilitate the SI process. These qualities included a high level of training and experience in local development and social articulation processes. AMB\_01 exerted a leadership role within the organization, through which, despite the negative expectations surrounding the prospecting, this individual was able to convince different actors in the initial stages, built bridges between different social groups (environmentalists and businessmen), and connected local organizations with other actors outside the territory (e.g., international NGOs). Furthermore, they demonstrated a strategic vision of the territory insofar as they fostered new capacities in local actors to solve future challenges, beyond the problem of prospecting (e.g., renewable energy projects):

“The strategy I follow is promoting new alliances and new contacts between projects because people here usually work too isolated. I identify emerging needs and look for new opportunities [...] Normally, economic and environmental interests are always the exact opposite here. But at the time I realized that everyone was moving in the same direction [...] People were worried, but there was no project. In the end it was a matter of holding these meetings [...] I could clearly see that to form an alliance, we all had to be in on it. I went to introduce myself to those I didn’t know [...] first we started showing a lot of respect, explaining why this made sense [...] we are all going to build it right from scratch [...] not moving with something vertical was most interesting.”  
(AMB\_01\_Key facilitator)

#### 5.2.2. The Convergence of Environmental Organizations and the Tourism Industry as the Promoting Force behind Alianza Mar Blava

In addition to IPF, the other environmental organizations also played a fundamental role in the implementation and development of AMB. They combined local entities with others integrated in international networks, with different activist profiles, all of which respond to the parameters of the social economy. They were the promoting force behind the initiative from the outset to the extent that they assumed responsibilities during the life of the initiative. Their role in AMB was essential to involve the citizens of Ibiza and Formentera. In addition, their knowledge of the natural environment was critical to the development process, for instance, in the dissemination of the conflict or the creation of narratives on sustainability.

As for the business sector, it was represented in the AMB by two of the most powerful business organizations in the territory. Both organizations were local but were integrated in their respective networks at regional and national levels. Their interest in AMB was associated with the preservation of tourism activity on the islands, something that the hydrocarbon projects put at risk. Thus, their involvement in the initiative clearly responded to a market logic. The representation of the business sector in the work team was limited in quantitative terms. However, all interviewees recognized their prominent role as promoters of AMB. These organizations assumed positions of responsibility in the association and were protagonists of one of the main social reconfigurations taking place in the framework of this SI process: the convergence between environmental and business actors.

Indeed, environmentalists and tourism industry constituted two traditionally antagonistic interest groups in the territory with a long history of conflicts, including legal ones. As a consequence of the hydrocarbon conflict and the creation of the AMB, they became, for the first time, part of the same network and collaborated in different practices. The complexity of this interaction explains why the design of AMB governance was one of the most important aspects for the actors of the initiative and, in fact, a defining element of this SI. AMB is an association with a balanced representation from the social (environmentalists), business and institutional spheres. Therefore, for instance, it was decided

to establish a small working group with three representatives from each of these sectors, two of whom acted as spokespersons on a rotating basis. In this group—and in the larger working group—decisions were taken by consensus.

IPF, as the main facilitating actor, played a prominent role in the design and control of these coordination mechanisms and avoided the predominance of individual leadership from any of the groups of actors, including its own. Along these lines, several interviewees indicated that the profile of the IPF—an environmental organization recently established in the territory—was perceived as more neutral than the rest of the local actors and, therefore, contributed to the necessary support during the early stages of the innovation process. For this reason, if the initial impulse of the process had been led, for example, by a town council or an environmental organization with a long history in Ibiza and Formentera, it would have been difficult to create such a broad network of actors in such a short time:

“If this project had been started by the GEN or Amics de la Terra, the traditional environmental organizations on the island, it would have generated mistrust because they have a label [...] People did not know us. We are a foundation from outside the island. We did not have an agenda and did not seek visibility.”  
(AMB\_01\_Key facilitator)

#### 5.2.3. Promotion and Facilitation of the Process by Public Institutions

The initial promoters of the process promoted the involvement of public administrations of the territory in the AMB, mainly town councils and island governments (local level). The participation of this type of actors was carried out through environmental practitioners of the institutions, but not through people with political responsibilities. This decision was intended to avoid possible conflicts and strategies in the field of local politics, and thus to facilitate the adhesion of those local administrations governed by the same party that formed the central government, against which action was intended to be taken. This measure also helped to show the alliance as an initiative of a cohesive community without internal tensions, which favored its role towards the central administration and the oil companies.

The leading participation of practitioners situated politicians as followers who supported the initiative, but without a prominent role in its functioning. Environmental practitioners, on the other hand, were the real promoters of AMB from the public sector. They also acted as intermediaries between the actors promoting the alliance and the political actors, being in charge of convincing them of the seriousness of the threat and the need to join in a collective action. Thanks to the facilitating role of the environmental practitioners, the financial support of the public sector was secured, thus making the economic sustainability of the initiative possible. Public administrations are also strategic in administrative–legal practices, such as the allegations presented in the concession files of hydrocarbon projects and environmental impact assessments:

“The Consell [island government] played a key role at the supra-municipal level. We made a great allegation against the prospecting projects [...] We had technical capacity and led that process. Then, local councils adapted our allegation to developed their own ones.” (AMB\_12\_Environmental technician in Consell of Ibiza)

“We knew that local administrations had to respond to these projects. If there had been only a reaction from social organizations, it would have not raised the same attention. We, as a local administration, had more capacity to suspend those operations.” (AMB\_11. Environmental technician from a local council)

#### 5.2.4. On Promoters from outside the Territory and Other Followers

Among the non-local actors involved in the AMB, it is worth mentioning the strategic role of technical profiles linked to international NGOs (Greenpeace) and Spanish consultancy firms (Salvia). These actors adopted a role that could be defined as a promoting



force, to the extent that they performed some of the most crucial actions of the initiative, including lobbying national and European bodies, and preparing technical studies. IPF networks, as a facilitating actor, were essential for the insertion of this expertise of other national and international NGOs into the local community.

Finally, AMB brought together a large number of organizations from various sectors—more than 100—in addition to independent individuals. Most of these actors supported the initiative, but their level of participation was relatively low. Within this type of followers, it is necessary to highlight the role of two local citizens' platforms (Eivissa Diu No and Plataforma Anti-Petrolífera), which emerged directly linked to the conflict under a strictly civil (community) logic. Their refusal to cooperate with the business sector prevented their inclusion in the association's working group; however, they did join as AMB supporters. They played a militant and activist role, complementing the more institutional nature of AMB. Nevertheless, after the first successes of the initiative, with the reduction of the climate of social conflict and the beginning of a more bureaucratic phase of work, the relevance of the citizens' platforms was drastically diluted.

### 5.3. *Cooperativa del Camp (Formentera, Spain)*

#### 5.3.1. Leadership of the Local Government

The island government—*Consell de Formentera*/Formentera Council—plays a leading role in CC. The *Consell* is governed by a local party established in 2007 (Gent per Formentera—GxF), with a nationalist and green left-wing profile. Its electoral program is committed to the revitalization of the agricultural sector through a new cooperative and the recovery of Formentera's rural landscape, not only as an input for tourism, but also as a defining element of the island's culture and territorial identity.

The *Consell* performed a triple role: facilitator, innovator, and promoter (see Figure A3). The role of facilitator was justified by its function of mobilizing the actors who led the first management board of the new cooperative and accompanied the administrative–legal process. For this purpose, he appealed to descendants of the former members, in addition to members of the only local agricultural association (*Associació de Ramaders*) and other individuals interested in agriculture. The *Consell* was also the main financial sponsor of CC and was the institution that encouraged the articulation of mechanisms for regular coordination between the cooperative and the public sector.

The *Consell* demonstrated a capacity for innovation. The political representatives of this administration were able to channel the concerns of the local population and design together with other promoters, projects of great originality in the territorial context of the study, such as the *Cens de Terres*. Its SI was a novel coordination mechanism by which civil society, in general, could transfer their land to the cooperative to be cultivated free of charge for periods of three, five or ten years.

One of the factors that explains the *Consell's* capacity for innovation was its singular institutional configuration. In 2007, Formentera eliminated its municipal administrations and grouped them under a sole uni-municipal entity. The *Consell Insular de Formentera*—located between the regional and municipal levels—assumed the administrative functions of the municipality but maintained a single government with insular status. This political-administrative peculiarity of the island of Formentera gives the territory a wide range of powers and, therefore, a greater capacity to design public policies than other rural local governments [87].

Lastly, the *Consell* was also a catalyst for the initiative due to its involvement in the development of the cooperative's activities. This implication is reflected in the intense coordination between the *Consell* itself and the cooperative, one of the most notable elements of innovation in CC. Through this coordination, the *Consell* addressed the needs of the cooperative and the agricultural sector and aligned them with other public projects in the area. The rationale behind this actor's participation is illustrated in the following statement:

“We live quite well because we earn a lot of money in summer [...] but we need to value our traditional environment. If you go to the beach and you see a nice rural

landscape, I think that's good for everyone [...] the primary sector makes us better as a community [...] in the past we were an extremely poor island [...] local people knew how to make a boat, a house, cultivate, manage a forest or the slaughter of cattle [...] we want to recover and diffuse this know-how to young people because tourism tends to standardize territories." (CAMP\_01\_Representative of the local government)

### 5.3.2. The Cooperative's Management Board: The Core of the Promoting Force

The other CC promoters were people from the cooperative's management board. A number of these actors also proposed new projects for the development of the cooperative and could, therefore, be described as innovators. They were all men and residents of the island, and the majority were aged between 46 and 60 years. They had different levels of education, from university to elementary education, and their professional background was also heterogeneous—only two members were specialized in agriculture. The core group of promoters participated in CC mainly under the logic of the social economy. Their motivations combined the desire to contribute to the reactivation of agriculture through collective entrepreneurship formulas (cooperatives), to satisfying shared emotional needs (for example, to avoid the abandonment of the fields) and, to a lesser extent, to achieving particular economic benefits (to obtain agricultural services at a lower price than the existing ones).

### 5.3.3. Civic Society Participation through the Cens de Terres

An essential element of the actor network in CC was represented by small landowners. In Formentera, local families frequently have agricultural plots, although few actually farm them. The *Cens de Terres* was the main instrument that connected these small landowners, and civil society in a broader sense, with the cooperative. Most of the people who transferred land were inhabitants who were descendants of families with strong family roots on the island. They were individuals who sought to recover Formentera's agricultural land, but due to their age or occupation, were unable to work them:

"I am really interested in everything implying taking care of our land [...] This was my parents' land. I do not want to sell it to anyone. I would be very grateful if the cooperative cultivates it because my children will not do it." (CAMP\_04\_User of Cens de Terres and member of the cooperative)

"I do not have enough time to work my land [...] that is why I transferred my plot to the cooperative, to see it alive and nice. In some way, this is the island's garden [...] I have been subjected to pressure from people who wanted to buy my land, but real estate is not the idea of investment I have." (CAMP\_08\_User of Cens de Terres and member of the cooperative)

The cooperative represented the central structure that enabled achievement of the involvement of civil society. It is a collective enterprise with a historical tradition on the island, rooted in the imagination of many families and, in principle, detached from political interests. The participation of small local landowners through the *Cens de Terres* and the cooperative introduced a community logic into the SI process, made possible a public–citizen coordination and, ultimately, increased the role of civil society in the rural development of Formentera.

### 5.3.4. Other Actors

Apart from the local government, the cooperative's management board and the landowners who participated in the Cens de Terres, there were not many other actors involved in CC. One of the actors that raised some interest was an agricultural practitioner, external to the territory, who was hired by the cooperative to lead several agricultural tasks (promoting role). This actor contributed to improving the limited agricultural knowledge of the cooperative members, bringing new ideas, and also had an essential part in guiding

the action of the public sector in this field (e.g., he was also the practitioner in charge of implementing a new public project on irrigation).

Finally, a further actor involved in CC was the LAG-LEADER Ibiza-Formentera. Its main function was to finance a substantial part of the cooperative's new assets (promoting role). Notwithstanding, the LAG's technical team did not entirely agree with two aspects of this initiative. On the one hand, a risk was seen in the financial dependence of the cooperative on the local government. On the other hand, it considered that the central role in the agricultural development of the territory should not only be played by the new cooperative, but also by a greater number of initiatives of individual and collective entrepreneurship.

## 6. Discussion

Several insights can be obtained from the results that contribute to the existing debate on the role of actors in SI processes in rural areas. In the following section, the role of local and non-local actors, the role of facilitating and neutral actors, of the social economy, of the public sector, and finally of LEADER and LAGs, are discussed.

### 6.1. *The Scale of Actors: SI as Local Processes*

The case studies in this research include changes in the relationships between actors at different territorial scales and reflect the bottom-linked character of SI [4,23]. For the main exogenous elements, the focus is on external actors with facilitating roles linked to the provision of funding, knowledge, or legal instruments. In CC, for instance, knowledge inputs were received which were justified by the scarce agricultural know-how of the new generations of Formentera and the current development model, centered on tourism. In AMB, the exogenous impulse was more powerful, as local actors required external experts capable of exercising a lobby function in national and international bodies in order to stop oil prospecting projects. Similarly, in BCT, public funding and the legal framework of the land reform were elements introduced by actors from outside the territory, which played a strategic role in the initiative.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to remark that all the innovation processes analyzed here were mainly driven by local community actors (bottom-up) and relied, in essence, on endogenous or place-based resources (e.g., forests, cultural and natural heritage, agricultural tradition, landscape, marine environment, etc.). Although actors from outside the territory contributed to consolidating SI initiatives, they did not represent the most prominent component in terms of innovation in social relations. For instance, in AMB, the most intense SI dimension lay in new business attitudes or new forms of coordination between tourism industry and environmentalists, all of which were generated within the local community. Even in the case of BCT, where the exogenous impulse was irreplaceable, the main SI process took place in the Birse Parish, with new local collective leadership, a new role for civil society and a new way of organizing land ownership.

This does not mean that exogenous impulses and external actors are unnecessary for SI in rural areas. On the contrary, they can play a very important role as triggers for innovation, and are almost always present throughout these processes. However, the essence of SI, at least in our case studies, can hardly be imported or introduced from outside. This interpretation might vary if we look at SI initiatives that are conceived from the outset at a supra-local or international scale, where exogenous impulses and external actors may play a stronger role in local transformations [88,89].

### 6.2. *The Role of Actors: Facilitators and Perceived Neutrality*

A tendency exists to mainly highlight the role of innovators and promoters in SI processes [9,50,55]. Nonetheless, in the framework of our research, actors with a facilitating role are of particular interest. Their role coincides with the core SI process, namely, they are the ones who create the conditions for the reconfiguration of social relations in the territory, encouraging reflection, making the advantages of innovation visible, and designing coor-

dination mechanisms adapted to the reality of the network of actors. The importance of these functions has also been highlighted in other studies [76]. In addition, our results also emphasize additional qualities of this role, such as normative and financial capacity, the building of networks between the territory and external organizations, and the promotion of community collective leadership.

In the case studies where clear facilitating roles were identified (CC and AMB), the facilitating actors were at the same time generators of ideas (innovators) and enabled the implementation of the activities of each initiative (promoters). Nevertheless, facilitating roles are not always clearly identified in SI processes—as is the case of BCT. Although the importance of the facilitating role is particularly relevant, it should not be forgotten; however, that they are not a sufficient condition for SI. In the preparation and implementation of innovation processes, this actor is always supported by other actors and roles, such as innovators and promoters.

The characteristics identified in the facilitator roles confer a relative attributed authority and intermediary role within and outside the rural community, in line with what Richter and Christmann [8] suggest. Notwithstanding, our study also identified another complementary characteristic that is key to SI facilitation: perceived neutrality. It is a relational and socially constructed concept that causes some actors to be perceived as politically less biased, compared with other actors. Actors perceived as neutral have greater capacity to lead SI processes. Moreover, our results suggest that the use of actors perceived as neutral contributes to the formation of networks, especially when SI processes involve radical reconfigurations and conflicts [27] or when political actors are involved. In our case studies some neutral actors followed a state logic, for example, environmental practitioners in AMB, who were perceived by environmental and business representatives as more neutral than political actors. This is also the case of SE organizations, whose nature responds to an intermediate logic. For example, IPF in AMB was perceived by local authorities and business organizations as more neutral than the other environmental organizations on Ibiza. Likewise, the new cooperative in CC, from the point of view of civil society, was perceived as more neutral than the local government, as it is historically rooted within local households. In BCT, on the other hand, a neutral actor leading the initiative would perhaps have reduced tensions between the innovator and the new members of the board team. Nevertheless, perceived neutrality is a quality of facilitating actors that may vary according to the territorial context (e.g., the trajectory and past events) and the nature of each initiative.

### 6.3. *The Logic of Actors: Social Economy, Public Sector and LEADER*

SE entities represent one of the most frequent actors playing a facilitating role. This research confirms the role of SE as a crucial actor in the activation and implementation of SI, something that has also been seen in previous research [28,50]. In all case studies we find such entities adopting innovative, promoting, and even facilitating roles. However, it is necessary to highlight that SE organizations have a particular prominence as an outcome of the SI process itself, meaning that they are ideal mechanisms to accommodate the new networks that are formed during innovation, and thus enable the implementation of collective actions [7,29,51]. AMB (association), CC (cooperative) and BCT (development trust) are all new coordination structures in the territory aligned with the premises of the SE that are created during the SI process. Mostly, aspects of process and participation turn them into coordination structures suitable for SI [48], such as the free entry of actors or their capacity to integrate the plurality of interests involved in SI initiatives. SE entities can play a crucial role as intermediaries in bottom-linked governance arrangements [8].

The role of the public sector is another controversial issue in the SI literature. The results of this research differ from the stream of studies that defend a view of SI where the public sector always has a complementary role [50,55]. Moreover, while confirming that civil society is present in all SI processes, the results raise some doubts about its necessary leading role [9,24,45]. As an example, in the initiatives located in Ibiza and Formentera,

the local government—municipalities and/or island government—acted as an internal facilitator and promoter (CC and AMB), and even as an innovator (CC). Indeed, in CC, the public sector could be considered as one of the leading actors in the SI, at least in the initial stages. This confirms the results of previous studies, such as Jungsberg et al. [7]. However, in BCT, the role of local government was very weak, and it was the public sector at the national level that adopted a strategic role as an external facilitator, funding the initiative and building a legal framework conducive to local civil society-led initiatives.

Therefore, the role of the public sector depends on the scale and specific nature of each initiative [7,29] and, in particular, on the institutional context of each territory [30]. The case of BCT would be an example of a response to the weaknesses of the local governance system in Scotland, a country where local governments cover populations and territories with a much larger extension than in Spain [90,91]. Formentera would be the opposite example, where the local government's regulatory and financial capacity on the island allows it to retain a leading role in the community and, therefore, in the SI. This example illustrates that bottom-linked governance and collective leadership can also be promoted by public actors. At the same time, it confirms the contextual nature of governance and leadership processes [40]. In this sense, development trusts could come to replace the role played by local councils in rural areas of Spain, not so much at the administrative-legal level, but in terms of economic and socio-cultural promotion. Nonetheless, even in this situation, the case of BCT demonstrates that the public sector at the national level can promote SI in rural areas.

In this regard, some scholars consider that the role of the public sector might be against the necessary activation of bottom-up processes in SI in rural areas [5,92]. However, according to our results, the presence of public actors does not compromise this logic. For example, in BCT, the case where the top-down impulse was most intense, there was a clear complementarity with the leadership of local actors [93]. As a matter of fact, in all the case studies, control of decision-making was retained in the local community and was shared by a pluralistic set of actors—not only the public sector. Moreover, civil society's autonomy is strengthened through all these initiatives and through bottom-linked governance mechanisms [8].

Lastly, and in relation to the role of public policies, the strategic role of LEADER in SI processes in rural areas should be further explored. In the case studies of this research, LEADER's role was far from demonstrating the SI potential attributed to it as a facilitator and innovator [67,68]. In two of the three cases (CC and BCT) LEADER intervened through the LAGs, but its function was limited to the financing of some very specific actions, and in the other case study (AMB) its role was of little relevance. However, the role of LEADER may vary according to the nature of SI processes and other territorial factors. For example, the absence of LEADER in cases such as AMB could be explained by the very nature of the initiative, which was of a conjunctural nature and, in principle, disconnected from the rural development strategy of the area in question. In CC, the LEADER group did not fully agree on how the initiative would develop, so its role was limited to providing funding. Moreover, in Ibiza and Formentera there were several public and private actors with sufficient financial capacity and flexibility that adopted a facilitating and promoting role (as in the case of IPF and local governments). Therefore, the role of LEADER in this area focused on other activities less visible to local society (small farmers, training for NGOs, etc.). In BCT, the small area represented by the parish within the wider LEADER area, the existence of several sources of funding for local communities in Scotland, and the active role of several citizens in the parish, may be factors explaining the limited role of LEADER in the initiative.

Additionally, the progressive bureaucratization of LEADER in recent times, the loss of its role as animator, and the lack of attention from regional and national governments may also explain its limited presence in SI initiatives [72,73,94]. Nevertheless, the situation might be different in more remote rural areas or areas less connected to global socio-economic



processes. In these territories, in the absence of other relevant actors, LEADER could play a more prominent role in facilitating SI [70].

## 7. Conclusions

Empirical research on which actors are involved in social innovation (SI) initiatives in rural territories and what role they play in these processes requires further attention from academia. This article has addressed this research gap by designing a framework based on three components: scale, role and logic. The contribution of this research derives from the empirical analysis of three case studies in rural areas of Spain and Scotland and the implementation of a comparative North–South European territorial approach. The results of the study have allowed us to better conceptualize the scale, role and logic of the actors participating in SI in rural areas. The study demonstrates that the core of social reconfigurations in SI initiatives is a local and endogenous process, which can be stimulated by external impulses. It also contributes to conceptualizing the role of facilitators in SI and identifies *perceived neutrality* as a new contextual quality that fosters network creation and collective leadership.

This research is relevant in terms of public policy because it describes the effective role that both local and national governments can play in SI in rural areas. It presents situations in which local authorities drive SI processes as innovators, promoters and/or facilitators. The potential role of national governments legitimizing creative local actions is also illustrated. From this study we derive the need to support social economy entities as an arena for SI and rural development. Finally, a more active role of LAGs–LEADER as promoters, innovators and facilitators seems to be required, especially in the most disadvantaged areas. However, this issue should be further explored in future research projects. The next research steps also need to focus on the role of actors in SI in a greater diversity of territories, comparing less affluent and more affluent rural areas.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to interviewees’ privacy and ethical restrictions.

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## Appendix A

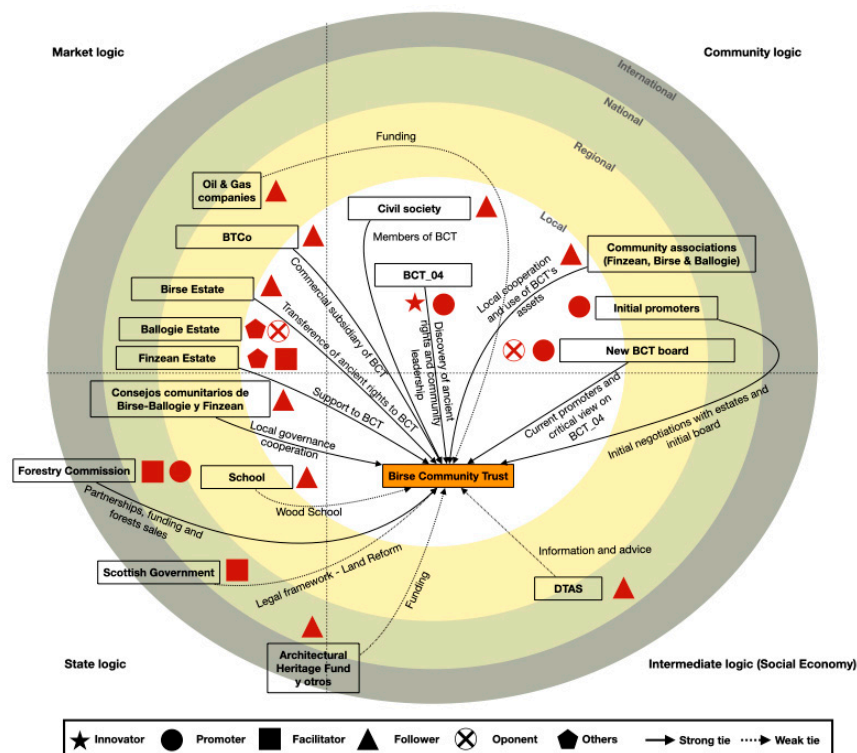


Figure A1. Actors involved in Birse Community Trust. Own elaboration.

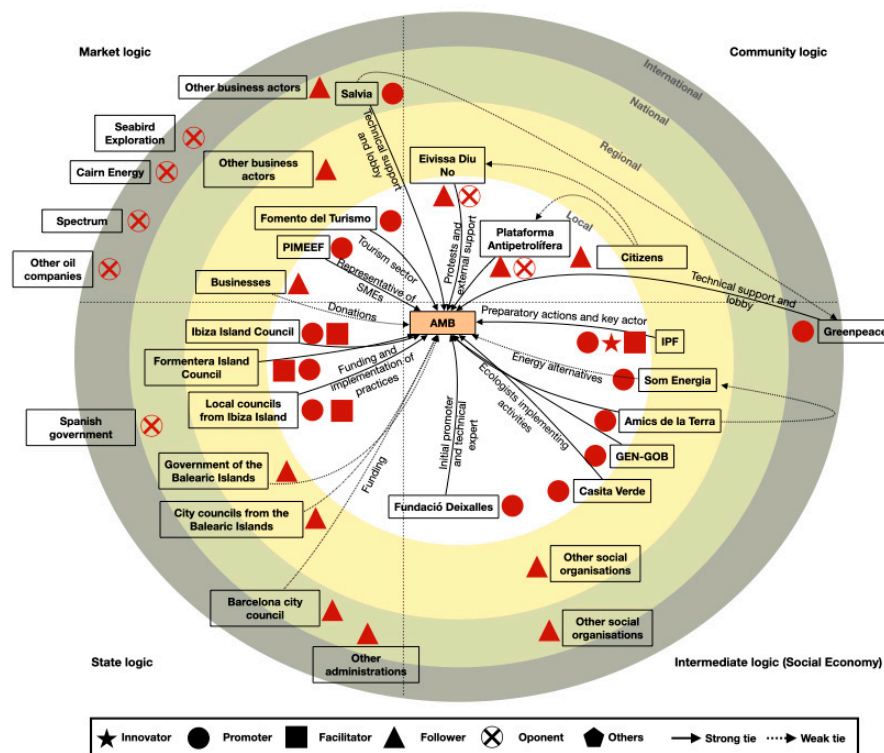


Figure A2. Actors involved in Alianza Mar Blava. Own elaboration.

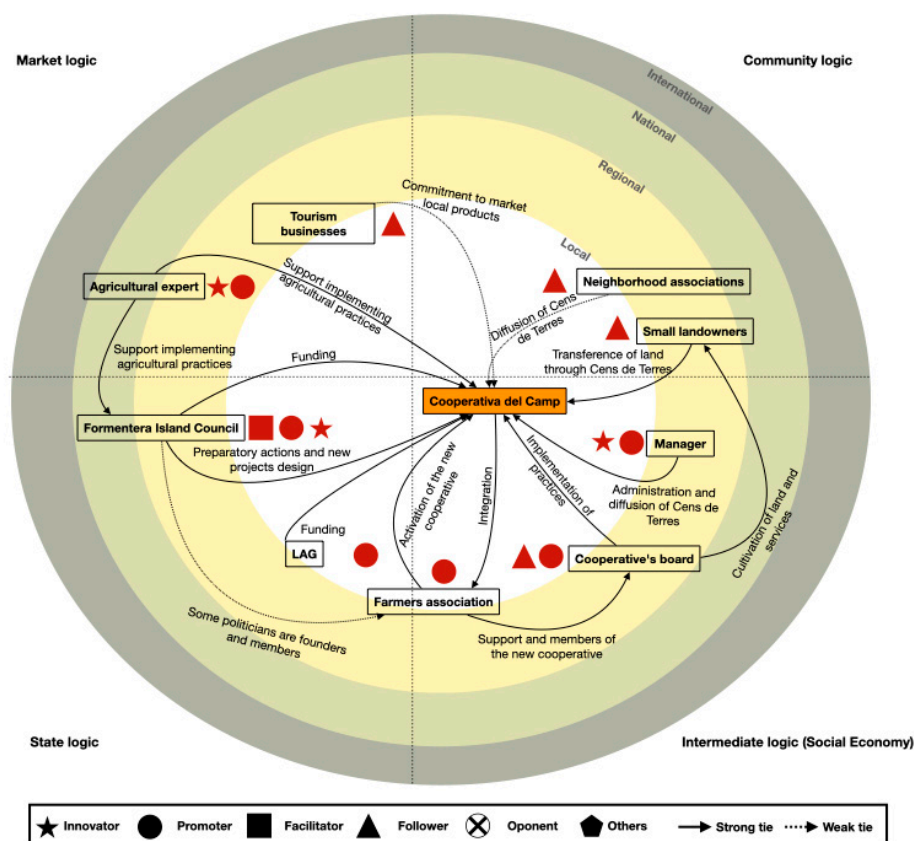


Figure A3. Actors involved in Cooperativa del Camp. Own elaboration.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The LEADER program (Liaisons entre Actions de Développement de L'Economie Rural) was launched in 1991 as part of the EU's rural development policy as an area-based, integrated and bottom-up method for delivering rural development.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.marblava.org>. (accessed on 5 April 2022)
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.birsecommunitytrust.org.uk>. (accessed on 23 January 2022)
- <sup>4</sup> From April 2019 the Forestry Commission has been split into two entities: Forestry and Land Scotland, as the body responsible for the management and promotion of publicly owned forests and land; and Scottish Forestry, responsible for forestry policy in Scotland and regulatory matters beyond public land.
- <sup>5</sup> Although LEADER Local Action Groups are not strictly public bodies, we mention them in this section as they are closely connected (and socially perceived) with the offices of local authorities in the UK context.

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